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Zhou Enlai and Chinese Grand Strategy

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There are comparatively few books about Chinese foreign policy in Chinese or English. Aside from the writings of Mao Zedong, there are virtually no specific books in Chinese about Chinese "grand strategy." Contemporary Chinese writers actually write very little about modern Chinese strategy. When they do investigate the subject, they tend to begin with the late Qing dynasty and focus on events before 1949. There are no memoirs published by Chinese prime ministers or foreign ministers to clarify issues and policies. Foreign writers can only draw analytical inferences from broad Chinese policy statements.

There are several reasons for this situation. First, China was largely isolated from the rest of the world between 1949 and the early 1970s. Second, Mao's political and ideological dominance of Chinese society effectively precluded the rise of any novel departures from his highly personalized strategy. Third, China's preoccupation with Marxist orthodoxy and a deterministic view of history further constrained the scope of policy and strategy. Finally, the Chinese have frequently and broadly stated many of their objectives, but they have been exceptionally unwilling to specify their strategies in open sources.

The net result has been a paucity of first-hand information about Chinese national security policy and its enabling strategies. When the Nixon administration decided to pursue the normalization of diplomatic relations with China in the early

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1970s, the result led to a watershed in Chinese national security policy and--one suspects--a marked change in grand strategy. In terms of this writing assignment, the reference material is not primary source material about Zhou Enlai and his grand strategy. At best it is Henry Kissinger's memoirs about Zhou and his journeys to China, and Robert Scalapino's analysis of China and the balance of power. Both writers view the international system in terms of power politics--and ascribe a similar world view to Zhou Enlai and the Chinese.

In terms of methodology, it is inappropriate to attribute China's grand strategy to Zhou based on Kissinger's memoirs. In the absence of Zhou's own memoirs we are left with Kissinger's interpretation. Kissinger is quite willing to make a conceptual leap from his experiences with Zhou to the Chinese in general ("cold-blooded practitioners of power politics"). While Kissinger recognized broad Chinese policy objectives, we must at least acknowledge that we are making inferences about the roots of Chinese grand strategy.

Finally, there are two important points that are related to an assessment of China's grand strategy. First, Mao Zedong in all likelihood (we can't be certain) played a far more critical role than Zhou Enlai in determining China's grand strategy. Kissinger almost totally misses this point. Second, it appears likely it was the Nixon administration's pursuit of detente more than any Chinese strategy that led to normalization. I would argue that it was Nixon's overtures that enabled the Chinese to recast their strategy and policy objectives. There is an obvious departure after the mid-1970s from China's earlier assumptions, interests, threat perceptions, foreign policy objectives, and utilization of power and resources to implement national

strategies.

Assumptions

The Chinese have not clearly enumerated the underlying assumptions regarding their grand strategy. Several of them, however, can be deduced. First, the doctrine of "imminent war" underscored a deep concern about what the Chinese generically called "super-power hegemony"--a codeword at various times for the US and the USSR.

Second, in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution many Chinese leaders became aware of an entirely new meaning of the concept of "the development of underdevelopment." They no longer assumed that socialist self-reliance was the only solution for underdevelopment.

Third, the Chinese were aware that diplomatic non-recognition seriously impeded access to the technologically and economically important "First World."

Fourth, Chinese efforts to be the leader of the Third World were largely unsuccessful--and costly. The political support of the Third World's poorest states did little to solve China's own economic development and defense construction problems.

Fifth, the Chinese knew little about the developed world. Although Kissinger was impressed by the breadth of Zhou's knowledge, Chinese officials were only vaguely aware of conditions outside China. None of the official think-tanks that came into existence in the early 1980s existed in the early 1970s.

Sixth, Kissinger suggests the Chinese assumed that detente might lead to a US-USSR condominium that would be to China's disadvantage.

Lastly, Mao and Zhou almost certainly were aware they had to seize opportunities to consolidate their historical legacy. There had been few domestic or international achievements since 1958--if not 1949.

National Interests and Threats

Following the border conflicts with the Soviet Union along the Ussuri River in 1969, Chinese propaganda stressed the "imminent war" doctrine. Polemics and practice both supported concrete preparations for war. These took the form of civil defense projects, grain storage, pervasive militia training, the further development of a nuclear "minimum deterrence" force, and the development of extensive Third Line defense factories.

Aside from the perception of a Soviet arc of containment, the Chinese also were concerned about the US war with Vietnam, border problems with India, Taiwan espionage and penetration of mainland airspace, Japan, and stability--or lack of it--on the Korean peninsula. Western observers may not have regarded other countries on the Asian rim as serious threats. The Chinese communists came to power, however, following more than a hundred years of intensive foreign intervention in China.

Curiously, there has long been a dichotomy in Chinese threat perceptions. On the one hand, they have articulated a macro threat assessment: They have clearly identified their enemies. On the other hand, there has been remarkably little non-strategic correlation between their force structure and specific foreign military threats. In part this is a function of limited resources. It also reflects, however, a longstanding tendency not to focus even limited resources on specific problems. PRC military

journals throughout the mid-1970s illustrate the lack of doctrine and guidance to link the military's force structure to specific threats.

If the national security of China was the preeminent strategic objective, then economic development was the premier domestic objective. This was a critical concern for several reasons. First, the Great Leap Forward, the Cultural Revolution, and inhibitive economic policies had crippled the Chinese economy. Second, the "imminent war" doctrine resulted in extensive and wasteful spending on redundant defense factories in China's interior. Substantially reduced defense spending could only be realized if there was a justification for changing China's threat perceptions.

Foreign Policy Objectives

Again, we cannot determine with certainty China's complete foreign policy agenda. Several objectives, however, were clearly discernible. As the leader of the developed world, the United States was the key to any Chinese grand strategy to achieve objectives involving the developed world.

First, the Chinese apparently wanted to ensure that the American and Soviet pursuit of detente did not lead to a joint effort to further isolate China.

Second, China wanted to decrease the likelihood of major conflicts along its borders. The establishment of diplomatic relations with the US was not synonymous with being allies. A "friendly relationship," however, provided the prospect of equilibrium in the international balance of power. Presumably the underlying calculus was that potential enemies (specifically the Soviet Union) would be less willing to attack China if such adventurism jeopardized a new and friendly "strategic relationship."

Chinese fears about the intentions of the bear to the north were not entirely ill-founded. There are several examples: the Soviet decision in 1965 to modernize and increase the presence of its troops on the Sino-Soviet border; the 1968 invasion of Czechoslovakia; and the Soviet Union's use of elite KGB border troops in 1969. By the late 1980's China not only succeeded in establishing an effective relationship with the United States, but the momentum of that relationship contributed to a more cooperative relationship between Moscow and Beijing.

Third, US diplomatic recognition was the keystone to China's aspirations for international respect. Movement toward diplomatic normalization would be an affirmative signal to other western nations that diplomatic recognition of the PRC was acceptable and would not invite US sanctions.

Fourth, membership in the United Nations would provide China with the ultimate symbol of legitimate participation in the international community.

Finally, dialogue with the United States led to a "one country, two systems" solution to the Taiwan problem. Immediate unification was not achieved, but that was not the near-term objective. The near-term objective was diplomatic recognition of the PRC, de-recognition of Taiwan, and the departure of foreign military forces from Taiwan.

The personalities of Zhou and Kissinger were important factors in successfully negotiating the normalization of diplomatic relations. The possible reactions of domestic populations were, however, no less important. Especially in China, Zhou and Mao had to orchestrate the introduction of what would be regarded as a significant shift in ideological orientation. Once again, Kissinger seems to miss the importance of

Mao's public assurance that the "new line" was ideologically acceptable.

Power and Resources

China's major source of negotiating leverage was its status as the "China card." The metaphor implies that China was in a passive relationship to the United States. Actually, China's potential position between the two superpowers constituted a position of strength. Notwithstanding qualitative considerations, China's military represented the world's largest standing army. China's strategic nuclear missile force also constituted a credible minimum deterrent against the Soviet Union. These capabilities were part of the "China card" that could be played by the Americans as well as the Chinese.

Additionally, the US desire to extricate itself from Vietnam provided the Chinese with opportunity to play the role of an intermediary. Although the United States overestimated Beijing's influence in Hanoi, it nonetheless was a role the Chinese could leverage to their advantage.

The Chinese also took advantage of the mysticism associated with China--a mysticism that was enhanced by prolonged isolation. Although the venue may not have been important to Kissinger, it was important to the Chinese. The fact that foreigners come to China psychologically confirms a cultural assumption among Chinese that barbarians come to the Chinese court. The Chinese seldom initiated travel to the barbarians' courts. The Chinese continue to maximize the "home court" advantage. Significantly, the Chinese have frequently fared badly when negotiating in foreign countries.

Finally, Zhou Enlai represented a unique asset. His urbane, statesmanlike demeanor consistently created a favorable impression among foreign leaders. Zhou enjoyed a public reputation that almost certainly exceeded his real capabilities. Nonetheless, the Chinese were able to use Zhou's public stature to great advantage. He lent respectability to a government that was burdened with 20 years of economic and political tragedies that frequently resulted from ideological excesses.

Strategies

Chinese objectives are fairly clear, but their strategies are seldom stated explicitly. In retrospect it is possible to identify several broad strategies.

First, the Chinese were prepared to play the role of a "balancer" between the US and the USSR. Being the "China card" had its advantages to the Chinese as well as the Americans. In effect, the Chinese could play the "American card" when it was to their advantage. Kissinger recognized that the Chinese were fully aware of the calculus of national interest and advantage.

Second, the Chinese tried to avoid potential Third World criticism that they had capitulated to the First World. Initially, at least, China frequently emphasized that it was a Third World country and had no aspirations for super power status. The Chinese have postured themselves properly, but their actions imply a desire for proper international stature that far exceeds that of a modest Third World country.

Third, the Chinese sought to elicit US criticism of the Soviet Union. Although the Chinese did not want an ally relationship with the US, they certainly wished to undermine any US-USSR condominium (i.e., detente). Eventually, the Chinese

tempered their own public criticism of the Russians, but during much of the 1970s their conversations with American officials emphasized the "common enemy" theme. They wanted the United States to deal with the Soviets aggressively. This was not because the Chinese necessarily believed an aggressive approach was the best approach: the friction simply suited Beijing's purposes.

Finally, the Chinese worked hard to dispel the criticism that when they joined the UN and the international community, they would use the international fora for propaganda purposes. To the surprise of many critics, the Chinese were exceptionally conservative and circumspect in their behavior and public statements. They wanted to be accepted as a respected member of the international community.

Priorities/Values

China's most important near-term objective was cultivating a counterbalance to the Soviet Union. The 1969 border clashes were a manifestation of more serious animosities and suspicions in Beijing and Moscow. The extent to which the Chinese realized how seriously the Russians considered surgical strikes against PLA installations is unknown. Chinese propaganda statements and war preparations implied, however, they possessed more than fragmentary intelligence.

It is doubtful--although the prospect cannot be dismissed--that the Chinese believed there could be any joint US-USSR military action against China. Realizing, however, that the US and USSR were serious about detente, the Chinese apparently believed they could not rule out the possibility the US might overlook aggressive Soviet moves along the Sino-Soviet border to avoid undermining detente.

Acceptance in the international community as a legitimate and respected state was another primary objective. Beginning the normalization process with the US was the key to access to the UN and other international agencies.

Conclusion

In 1985 Deng Xiaoping announced in a closed Central Committee meeting that it was no longer necessary for China to be in a state of constant war preparedness. The "imminent war" doctrine was supplanted by the doctrines of "no war for 20 years or more" and "war can be avoided." Deng's pronouncement signaled a diminution of the Chinese perception of the Russian threat. The Chinese achieved nearly every international objective they sought. They successfully played the "American card."

Success in the arena of grand strategy brought problems of a different stripe: domestic tensions and controversy regarding the economy, political structure and social fabric. It comes as something of a surprise that the Chinese have played the game of international politics far more deftly than they have played the game of domestic Chinese politics. If there is a lesson about international politics they do not seem to understand fully, it is that status as a major power involves significant restraints and international criticism--even regarding domestic politics.